

What Role Does Reason Play?

Exodus, Chapter 21

1. And these are the ordinances that you shall set before them.

And these are the ordinances

Rashi

Wherever it says, "these" in the Torah, it (this word) is used to separate from what has been stated previously. "And these," means that it is adding to what has been previously stated. Thus just as what has been previously stated (the Ten Commandments,) were from Sinai, these (the commandments that the Torah is about to state) too were from Sinai.

That you shall set before them

Rashi

The Holy One, blessed is He, said to Moses: Do not think of saying, "I will teach them the chapter or the law two or three times until they know it well, as it was taught, but I will not trouble myself to enable them to understand the reasons for the matter and its explanation." Therefore, it is said: "you shall set before them," like a table, set with food and prepared to eat from, placed before someone.

Eiruvim 54b

The Rabbis ask how was the Torah taught. Moses learned from G-d. Aaron entered and Moses taught him. Aaron then sat down to the left of Moses and Aaron's children entered and Moses taught them. Aaron's sons sat down, Elazar to the right of Moses and Itamar to the left of Aaron...The Elders entered and Moses taught them. The nation entered and Moses taught them. We find the total teachings of Aaron is four, of his sons is three, of the elders is two and of the whole nation is one. Moses departed and Aaron taught them. Aaron departed and his sons taught them. His sons departed and the elders taught them. Thus the teachings heard by all were four...R' Akiva said, how do we know that a person is obligated to teach his students until they have learned it? Since it says, "and teach it to the children of Israel." How do we know (a teacher must teach) until it is organized in their mouth, as it says, "put it into their mouths." And how do we know to show him its face (make it understood) as it says, "and these are the laws that you should put before them."

Before them

Rashi

But not before gentiles. Even if you know that they [gentiles] judge a certain law similarly to the laws of Israel, do not bring it to their courts, for one who brings Jewish lawsuits before gentiles profanes the [Divine] Name and honors the name of idols to give them importance, as it is said: "For not like our G-d is their god. When [we let] our enemies judge [us], this is testimony to [our] esteem of their deity.

Before them

Torah Ohr

To their innermost selves. The knowledge of G-d should enter the most inward reaches of the Jewish soul. (Lifneihem=pnimityutom)

Deut. 6:20

If your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What are the testimonies (Eidot), the statutes (Chukim), and the ordinances (Mishpatim), which the L-rd our G-d has commanded you?"

פרק כא
א. ואלה המשפטים
אשר תשים לפניהם:



Eidot:

Chukim:

Mishpatim:

Eiruvin 100b

R. Yochanan said: "Had the Torah not been given, we would have learned modesty from the cat, honesty from the ant, sexual morality from the dove and decency from the chicken.

Tanya

The rationales of the mitzvot have not been revealed, for they are beyond reason and understanding. Also in those instances in which there has been revealed and explained a certain reason which is apparently comprehensible to us, this is not ... the ultimate reason, for within it is contained an inner, sublime wisdom that is beyond reason and understanding.

Maimonides

Although all the chukim of the Torah are supra-rational decrees... it is fitting to contemplate them, and whatever can be explained, should be explained.

The Rebbe

Mishpatim are not merely the means to ensure society's survival; they are meant to be ways to connect to G-d. To abide by them simply because they are sensible is to fail to recognize their infinite value as part of the Divine vision.

For this reason the Torah prohibits a Jew from bringing his case before a non-Jewish courts. Even if the laws coincide in practice, a law which has its source in reason is not the same as one which is based on the words, "I am the L-rd your G-d," and its verdicts do not emanate from Torah.

On the other hand, our unquestioning acceptance of G-d's commandments does not mean that we are to perform them with mindless obedience. Understanding the reasoning behind the commandments allows them to become part of our world and completely engage us. The more we understand of the Torah's ways and reasoning, the more its ideals can become our ideals and its way of life ours. Every facet of our activity, from eating habits to business affairs has the potential to connect us to G-d.

SUMMARY

- Every mitzvah -- whether categorized as a "chok" or a "mishpat"-- is an act of submission to the divine will, recognizing that our finite minds must ultimately accept these laws on faith from their divine conceiver.
- At the same time, every mitzvah is a rational act in the sense that it aids us to achieve a better understanding of our nature and purpose in life. We should perform mitzvot with the best understanding possible, but not because of it.
- Even though reason might lead a man to obey mishpatim, it would not bring him to closeness with G-d. This is the difference between an act which is reasonable and an act which is a mitzvah. "Mitzvah" means "connection": it is the link between man and G-d.
- The portion of mishpatim follows the events of Matan Torah, the revelation of Sinai, since the purpose of Torah is to bring Divine revelation into the everyday matters of our lives.

